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Campus watch, but better – Freedom Party and politics of obstruction

By Prof Maurits Berger

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A conference organized by me on sharia in the West was reason for Geert Wilders' Freedom Party (PVV) to make use of the parliamentary right to ask questions to cabinet ministers, in this case the Ministers of Interior and Education. Some questions were based on faulty assumptions (that our conference was organized in conjunction with the European Council for Fatwa and Research, for instance), other questions required some exegesis (for instance, whether the Ministers agreed that the central questions of the conference would be 'a sign of progressive Islamization in education').

The way the whole issue was launched by the PVV was typical of this party's policies: they hurl a set of statements and assumptions into the public domain, which are then quickly reproduced by the media. Insofar as media is interested in facts and backgrounds, they usually do not inquire with the PVV (because they never respond), but to those who stand accused. The no-response policy by the PVV was very effective, because it brought about the wondrous situation of journalists asking what *we* thought that the PVV 'may have meant' by questions that were either lies or incomprehensible.

What took the PVV three seconds to say, took us three days to rectify by means of press releases and answering journalists and the Ministry's civil servants who had to formulate the formal answer to the parliamentary inquiries. Why would you respond at all, colleagues asked, why bother if it is all lies anyway? But that was exactly the reason why we had to react: the lies would stick if we did not deny them. And denying lies, it turned out, is not easy.

This method is as effective as it is perverse. It is as if I would call someone on the radio a whoremonger and would then refuse any comment. In normal life I would have been the person who would have to corroborate such a serious accusation. But not in this life, not here in Holland. Not reacting to insinuations is accepting guilt. And accusing, even insulting, has become part of the freedom of speech. So bring in the mud and the slings.

This method is also successful for other reasons. Imagine that your name is mentioned as part of a parliamentary question. It happened to one of my colleagues at university. He is a specialist of Islam and I had urged him to write more newspaper articles because we, as academics, had a duty to take part in public debates, especially in issues as sensitive as Islam and Muslims. It was our obligation to make the public aware of what is fact and what is falsehood, so I told him. And then one morning he walked into my office, white as a sheet, stuttering that his name and article were subject of parliamentary questions posed by the PVV. Their statements were – again – false, their arguments – as usual – nonsense, but that was not the issue. The game of blaming and shaming was played, and my colleague will never write again. One-zero for the PVV.

The ingenuity of the perversity gets better. Many colleagues will shrug their shoulders: as long as it does not affect your academic freedom, let them talk their rubbish. But it is not what they say, not even that they say it, but the prolific way of saying it. The incredible repetitiousness of these kinds of nonsense – the PVV is the party that asks by far the most parliamentary questions – and the constitutional obligation of the Ministers to answer has made people cautious or even fearful. Better not to have such kind of conferences like ours, because it may cause questions being asked in parliament. Civil servants suffer from the same inhibition: we know there is nothing against such conferences, but perhaps it is better not to subsidize such an event because... you know. The self-censorship has kicked in, and the nonsense has become a measure stick in real life.

The most frustrating aspect is that the PVV is not interested in the content of what they criticize. They were of course immediately invited to attend the conference. But none of them appeared, and no one asked for the conference proceedings. It is Islam, Muslims, Sharia and therefore: bad. And who is interested in badness? I used the argument that our rejection of genocide, fascism or serial killers does not preclude our academic interest in these issues. So, even if a party like the PVV abhors Islam as a 'totalitarian doctrine aiming at domination, violence and oppression' (from the PVV's latest election programme), one would expect that they would like to know their enemy. But no.

This puts scholars of Islam in a particular difficult position. At Leiden we have established the Leiden University Center for the Study of Islam and Society (LUCIS) that aims at catering to the societal and political need for background information on Islam and Muslims. We academics at LUCIS want to leave our ivory towers and step into society. But the only arms we have is knowledge, and the only skills we have is to disseminate that knowledge. We are not prepared at all for the kind of onslaught that we receive from organizations like the PVV.

How to respond? And – more important - how do we get the time to respond? How can we turn the tables so that we can give a quick answer in three seconds and oblige the PVV to spend three days substantiating their ludicrous remarks? At present we are not equipped to do so, and as a reaction we mostly retreat back into our ivory tower where we can continue working on our peer-reviewed articles that ultimately will get us more credits within the university.

This situation has been on my mind for years, and as of recent really started to worry me. Because it is not only academics that are being cornered. The self-censorship has become all-pervasive. That means that the PVV is gaining the upperhand with empty rhetoric that we all know to be nonsense. As academics we fail the means to fight it, but neither can we allow ourselves to rely on the smug assumption that truth will prevail. It won't, because new truths are being created. We need to change logic and methods – the thing is that I do not yet quite know how and what.

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